

A Critical History of Internet Activism and Social Protest in Malaysia, 1998-2011*

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Abstract

This article asks two related questions. First, to what extent has internet activism shaped social protest in Malaysia from the late 1990s to the present? Second, what can the history of internet activism and social protest in Malaysia tell us, if anything, about the 2011 global wave of protests? To address these questions I distinguish three key moments in Malaysia's eventful history of internet activism and social protest, namely the 1998-1999 reformasi movement, the electoral 'tsunami' of 2008 (in which the ruling coalition lost its two-thirds majority), and the Bersih 2.0 rallies of 2011. I argue that Bersih 2.0 is best explained as both the latest episode in a series of uniquely Malaysian techno-political events and as a local variant of the global wave of protests of 2011 – a wave in which hackers, online journalists, and technology lawyers, as well as ordinary citizens using digital media, played an important part. The article ends with a summary and with suggestions for further research.

Keywords

new social movements – protest – internet activism – new media – social media – Malaysia – reformasi – Bersih 2.0

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1 Introduction

Southeast Asia boasts a pioneering history of digital activism and mobilisation, including the use of mailing lists in 1989 to protest against the Tiananmen Square massacre, the reformist movements that ushered in democratic regimes to the Philippines and Indonesia in 1998, the intensive use of mobile phones to launch mass protests against President Estrada in 2001 (Rafael 2003), and the July 2011 Bersih 2.0 rallies in Malaysia in which social media and smartphones were widely employed to campaign for democratic freedoms (Chang et al. 2011). Despite this impressive track record, Southeast Asia has been marginalised from 'global' accounts of the role of networked technologies in social protest since the Zapatista uprising of 1994 (Castells 2001), a history that has so far centred on North America, Europe, and the Middle East.

In recent years a new academic literature has mushroomed around the study of digital media in relation to the global wave of protest of 2011, particularly around the so-called Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement. Some of the numerous research topics to date include the virality of protest, protesters' social capital, the aesthetics of protest, or the figure of the martyr in a Middle Eastern context (Postill 2013a). Besides a large number of nation-specific studies, there exists a growing corpus of works that seek to provide general theories of the technological dimensions of protest. These theories variously explain the new protests with reference to the rise of a global 'network society' (Castells 2012), the impact of digital media as political 'game-changers' (Tufekci 2011), the articulation of online and offline practices through the occupation of squares (Gerbaudo 2012), or the protracted crisis of global capitalism (Tejerina et al. 2013).

This is also a field of inquiry and public scholarship prone to controversy. The main polemics to date have centred on two questions, namely the extent to which social media such as Facebook or Twitter are contributing to new forms of democratic emancipation, and the issue of how new, if at all, these 'new social movements' really are (see Gladwell 2010, Morozov 2013). As these debates are marred by a tendency towards polarisation, my aim in this article is to steer clear of the polemics and to broaden the discussion in two new directions. On the one hand, I seek to broaden it geographically by focusing on a country that had its fair share of unrest and digital media activism in 2011 but has received far less scholarly attention than countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, or the United States, namely Malaysia. On the other, I will deepen the inquiry historically by tracing the collective career of internet activism back to an earlier convergence of internet activism and social protest, namely the

1998-1999 *reformasi* years that followed the regional financial crisis of 1997.¹ The rationale for this second move is to counter our obstinate fixation with the present and near future (Postill 2012) and begin to take seriously the recent past, which to many technology scholars remains very much a foreign country.²

With these considerations in mind, below I ask two entwined questions. First, to what extent has internet activism shaped social protest in Malaysia from the late 1990s to the present? Second, what can the history of internet activism and social protest in Malaysia tell us, if anything, about the 2011 global wave of protests? To address these questions I distinguish three key moments in Malaysia's eventful history of internet activism and social protest, namely the 1998-1999 *reformasi* movement, the electoral 'tsunami' of 2008 (in which the ruling coalition lost its two-thirds majority) and the Bersih 2.0 rallies of 2011. I argue that Bersih 2.0 is best explained as *both* the latest episode in a series of uniquely Malaysian techno-political events *and* as a local variant of the global wave of protests of 2011 – a wave in which hackers, online journalists, and technology lawyers, as well as ordinary citizens using social and mobile media, played an important part. The article ends with a summary and with suggestions for further research.

Nation-States as New Media Labs

Before we can broach the question of internet activism and social protest, we must first chase away a ghostly notion that has haunted the humanities and social sciences since the 1980s, that is, the idea that nation-states are 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). The problem here lies not so much with Anderson's original concept, but rather with how it has been adopted by generations of scholars and students to argue, against the evidence of their own life experiences, that there is no congruence between place, culture, and people (see Postill 2006: 16). In other words, saying that Italy, Malaysia, or Zambia

1 This article is chiefly based on a closed, critical reading of the relevant scholarship as well as (less extensively) on anthropological fieldwork that I conducted in Subang Jaya (Malaysia) in 2003-2004.

2 This raises the epistemological question of how far back one need go in order to add a meaningful diachronic dimension to one's study. In other words, how recent is 'the recent past'? In my view, there is no universal answer to this question, but rather country- or region-specific answers. In the case of Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries, starting this account with the events following the 1997 regional financial crisis is a useful way of drawing a baseline from which to contrast each state's unique trajectory, as well as a way of discerning parallels across borders.

are merely imagined communities – in the sense of creative works of the modern mind – is a very poor way of describing these complex socio-political formations. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, modern countries are far more than imagined communities: they are the thickest culture areas of our age, lived-in worlds whose permanent residents are caught in dense tangles of technical, political, and economic relations that short-term visitors may find perplexing (Postill 2011). In addition, nation-states are vast media laboratories where variously positioned social agents deploy a range of old and new media to pursue (or resist) change – often with unanticipated results. Located at the unstable nexus of global and local forces, nation-states make ideal homes for ‘middle-range theories’ (Hedström & Udehn 2009) that regard the unique constellations of intersecting media policies, practices, and technologies found in each country as ‘natural experiments’ (Diamond & Robinson 2010) in media and/or socio-political change.

New media technologies have been a priority in many countries around the globe, including emerging economies, since the 1990s. This interest has often been couched in the language of competitiveness, national security, social changing (how things are changing at present), and imminentism. A commonly held belief in economic planning circles has been that the ‘Information Society’ is both inevitable and imminent, and that developing nations have no choice but to embrace the new era or they will perish. South Korea provides a striking example of a country pursuing advanced digital policies since the 1980s couched in a nation-building idiom. The prevailing techno-nationalistic discourse became intensified following the regional economic crisis of 1997. A combination of favourable policies towards the online gaming industry, business interests, and technological innovation created a highly conducive environment for the explosive growth of Korea’s gaming subculture. This strategy was later emulated by other countries in the region, such as Singapore and China. As a result, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has consistently ranked South Korea first in its Digital Opportunity Index (Ok 2011).

As we would expect, Brazil has followed its own distinctive digital trajectory, one radically different from that of South Korea. Under the stewardship of its leftist President Lula and the Culture Minister Gilberto Gil, Brazil adopted the world’s most advanced public policies in support of free software, creative commons, and digital inclusion. In part, the free culture and anti-corporate globalisation rhetoric was a way of making virtue out of necessity, as this stance translated into huge public savings in imported proprietary software. The policy framework set out by the government has influenced in both direct and subtle ways how young Brazilians consume digital media (Horst 2011).

Malaysia followed the South Korean example from the mid-1990s, when the federal government called for a move towards a knowledge-based economy as the country faced greater competition from China, Vietnam, and other low-cost production countries (Postill 2011). In 1996, a 'cyber-region' known as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) was carved out to the south of Kuala Lumpur. Designed as a global centre for multimedia technologies and contents, its aim was to 'leapfrog' Malaysia from the Industrial Era to the Information Era. The MSC was in line with Prime Minister Mahathir's Vision 2020, the dream of a fully developed, knowledge-driven Malaysia by 2020 (Yong 2003, Nain 2004). The vision was 'for government, businesses and citizens to work together for the benefit of the country and all its citizens' (Yong 2003: 190).

In practice, however, the 'social life' of these policies can lead to unpredictable outcomes. Thus in my study of SJ2005, an initiative aimed at transforming the Kuala Lumpur suburb of Subang Jaya into an ICT-driven 'smart community' by 2005, I found that SJ2005 was an ephemeral site of inter-sectoral contest rather than tri-sectoral integration of public, private, and civic stakeholders, as originally envisaged by the digital policy makers. Ironically, this top-down project helped to transform Subang Jaya into a hub of internet activism and (cautious) democratic reform (Postill 2011).³

Having sketched Malaysia's digital pathway, we can now consider in some detail its peculiar techno-political trajectory.

2 The First *Reformasi* Wave, 1998-1999

The collapse of Southeast Asia's financial markets in 1997 put an end to Malaysia's spectacular economic growth, with profound consequences for the viability of its status quo. This status quo had remained in place since the country's independence from Britain in 1957. The crisis revealed very high levels of borrowing and over-capacity, throwing into disarray a national project built on perpetual growth, development, and stable ethnic relations between

3 Lest I be accused of nation-state-centrism, I should add that this focus on national cultures does not preclude the possibility of conducting transnational studies of media and actual social or political changes. For example, it would be worthwhile to track and compare the media aspects of transnational social changes such as suburbanisation and/or the spread of Pentecostalism, and indeed their interrelations, not least in countries like Brazil, South Korea, and Malaysia where both phenomena have exploded in recent decades (Oosterbaan 2011: 56).

the country's Malay-Muslim majority and its Chinese, Indian, and other non-Muslim minorities (Clarke 1998, Nair 2007: 339).⁴

On 20 September 1998, the deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, was taken into custody by masked men under Malaysia's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), an unloved legacy of the British colonial era. Anwar stood accused of corruption and sodomy, a charge widely regarded as politically motivated (Abbott 2001: 101, Clarke 2008). Until that moment the heir apparent to PM Dr Mahathir Mohamed, Anwar was now a political prisoner.

This extraordinary turn of events triggered an online explosion of support for Anwar that led to Malaysia's 'first organised large-scale protest movement', which came to be known as *reformasi* (reform) (Nair 2007: 339).⁵ A few months later, over 50 pro-Anwar websites had been created and at its 1999 peak the *Laman Reformasi* site received more than five million visits (Abbott 2001: 14, Tan 2004). According to Netto (2001: 15), protesters went online 'like ducks taking to water' (quoted in Tan 2004), their news sites, forums, and listservs functioning as ersatz meeting places in a country where the right of assembly in physical space is severely curtailed (Tan 2004).

Some observers, however, were sceptical at the time about the emancipatory potential of such initiatives. For example, Abbott (2001) suggested that in countries such as China or Malaysia suffering from an acute 'digital divide', the internet can only have a limited impact on a political system. In addition, the internet was becoming increasingly commercialised and used for pursuits other than activism or politics. This view is problematic, as it is based on too rigid a conception of the digital divide. In fact, as Miller and Slater (2000) showed in their early ethnographic study of internet practices in Trinidad, internet contents can reach even remote rural areas through a variety of means, including face-to-face communication, landline telephones, and letters. These researchers were surprised to find not a sharp digital divide in Trinidad but rather highly differentiated, and often ingenious, ways of accessing this network directly or indirectly. Similarly, Abbott himself explains that by the late 1990s, the internet had already become the principal means of communication for Malaysia's opposition and civil society, as well as an important source of news for all sectors of the population, including rural Malays. Malaysians

4 It is important to remark that the Asian crisis did not affect all states equally. For instance, its effects on the Singaporean economy were far less severe than on those of neighbouring Indonesia or Malaysia. The political fallout varied greatly as well. Thus the alleged role of George Soros and other foreign speculators in the crisis was far more prominent in Malaysia than elsewhere.

5 To what extent the new movement was also influenced by events in countries such as Indonesia or the Philippines is an open question.

proved to be highly resourceful and inventive since the early months of *reformasi*, reaching out to people without internet access by means of faxes, CDs, print-outs, photocopies, letters, and word of mouth (Abbott 2001: 105). Their nation's curious combination of illiberal democracy and internet freedom (a result of PM Mahathir's pledge to foreign investors that the government would not censor the internet) created conditions highly conducive to online activism, conditions that were not to be found in more repressive states like Singapore or China.

Another common misconception about this period is the idea that *reformasi* was merely a fleeting episode. Whilst it is tempting to see protests as 'boom-and-bust' cycles of collective action (Comparative Media Studies 2013), this is only part of the story. Every complex societal process, including the struggle for political reform in Malaysia, consists not of a single timeline but of a diverse unfolding of concurrent events, trends, and routines (see Sewell 2005). In other words, protest movements are multilinear rather than unilinear processes (Postill 2013b). This means that in any given period of time we are likely to find not a sole trend but a mixed set of trends.

The year 2004 presents us with a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. This was the year in which the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), won a decisive victory under the leadership of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, a soft-spoken man with a clean image on whom a great deal of hope had been invested as a positive force for change in a post-Mahathir era. This was also the year when the few remaining *reformasi* websites became inactive or disappeared. Thus Tan (2004) found that while in 2003 the number of comprehensive sites that had vanished was 71, by 2004 there were 109 such sites. Following the March 2004 general election, 181 out of 191 *reformasi* sites had either disappeared or become dormant.

For Tan (2004) the decline and eventual demise of oppositional sites in 2004 is proof of 'the ephemeral nature of [the] virtual world'. These are sites, he adds, at the mercy of the vagaries of political contention – here today, gone tomorrow. The existing evidence, however, contradicts this assessment. It is important, first of all, not to reduce a country's politics to its electoral cycle. Although it is true that 2004 was a disastrous *electoral* year for proponents of political reform, we also see signs that same year of a growing consolidation of oppositional forces, both offline and online. It was in 2004 that Anwar Ibrahim was finally released from prison and was able to fully resume his political career. The year 2004 was also when socio-political blogging came into its own in Malaysia. We could define this new internet trend as the pursuit of *reformasi* through new technological means. Tang (2006: 8) describes this moment vividly:

Updated frequently, robust in their criticism, showing extraordinary resourcefulness and relying on their readers as sources, blogs are starting to compete with traditional media in playing a significant role in disseminating information to the public.

The case of the then blogger, now MP (see next section), Jeff Ooi is instructive about a wider upward trend in Malaysia's political scene, and more generally of the country's techno-political maturation. In January 2003 Ooi, a businessman with a flair for digital technology, launched the current affairs blog Screenshots. When I first met Ooi in May 2003 in the Kuala Lumpur suburb of Subang Jaya, where he was a leading local activist, he was already a rising star in the national blogosphere⁶ and an enthusiast of the new genre (Postill 2006: 31). Known for his fearless denunciation of corruption in the corridors of economic and political power, Ooi came to embody Wellman's (2001) 'networked individual', an extremely well connected, technology savvy David taking on the Goliaths of this world. One of the keys to his success was his far-flung flock of 'little birds', namely readers, bloggers, journalists, and others who fed him scoops about the rich and powerful. Over time he developed relations of trust with mainstream reporters and editors who would often share with him information that their government-controlled employers barred them from publishing (Postill 2011: 76).

Of course, in our contemporary 'hybrid media systems' in which old and new media interact incessantly (Chadwick 2013) no blogger is an island, and on a number of occasions Ooi came close to being arrested under Malaysia's infamous ISA over contents published on his blog. For instance, in October 2004 he was questioned by the police over a blog comment posted by an anonymous visitor accused of insulting Islam (Postill 2011: 76). Partly as a form of insurance against such threats, in June 2003 Ooi had co-founded Project Petaling Street, a Malaysian blog aggregator that became 'an instant success'. By December 2003 this portal had clocked over a million 'hits' and tripled the number of bloggers to nearly 400, contributing to the country's 'culture of democratisation', a supportive environment aimed at giving individuals the freedom to blog regardless of their creed, ethnicity, or gender (Tang 2006).

In December 2004 Ooi was invited to Harvard Law School to speak about his experiences along with other leading bloggers and internet activists from South Korea, Iran, Canada, the US, and elsewhere. This invitation confirmed

6 I use the notion of 'national blogosphere' advisedly, for there is little spillover across national borders. As the Malaysian blogosphere expert Julian Hopkins argues (personal communication, 2 December 2013), 'online spheres tend to reflect the offline'. For example, 'foreign affairs are expressed in locally oriented discourses' (see also Khalid & Yacob 2012: 373).

Ooi's standing as one of Malaysia's leading bloggers. It also indexed that his struggle, and that of fellow reformists in Malaysia, was a small part of a much larger global movement for greater freedoms. This movement would go on to take the world by storm in late 2010 and throughout 2011 with the 'mainstreaming of nerd politics' epitomised by the intervention of techno-libertarian networks such as Global Voices, Wikileaks, and Anonymous in the Arab, indignados, and Occupy protests (Postill 2013a). Indeed, it was soon after this conference that Global Voices, today an influential worldwide network of activist bloggers, was founded at Harvard, with Ooi's Screenshots given a prominent spot on their homepage. As Rebecca McKinnon put it in her workshop report (quoted in Tang 2006):

Most in the room agreed that we are indeed a movement: a movement not only of bloggers, but also of wiki-builders and users of other kinds of social or peer-produced media who want to build a better global conversation.

Meanwhile, a range of alternative media continued to flourish during this period. Thus Malaysia's first commercial online newspaper, Malaysiakini, who also featured a link to Ooi's blog on its homepage, was going from strength to strength. Founded in November 1999, this innovative media organisation took advantage of the government's commitment to an uncensored internet to become a role-model for similar outlets around the globe. Being exclusively online, Malaysiakini managed to 'avoid the strict regulations that restrict press freedom within Malaysia' (Tan 2004). Other 'democracy bulwarks' included the human rights portal Aliran.com, based on a long-established magazine with a broadly leftist agenda for social justice, workers' rights, indigenous people, etc., and the Mandarin-language The Free Media, a website launched in April 2001 to oppose the takeover of two Chinese newspapers by MCA (the Chinese component of the ruling coalition). This site is an early example of citizen-driven journalism and news crowdsourcing in which a community of 'producers' are made responsible for sustaining the organisation. Like Malaysiakini or bloggers such as Jeff Ooi, it is also an example of an outlet publishing scoops provided by mainstream journalists unable to make use of them (Tan 2004).

3 **An Electoral 'Tsunami', 2008**

The build-up to the 8 March 2008 general election saw the creation of another 'formidable alliance' of strange bedfellows: the People's Alliance (Pakatan

Rakyat), a coalition of Malay reformists, Malay Islamists, and mostly Chinese secularists (Liow 2012). The new platform enjoyed a strong input from activists 'strategizing opposition collaboration, standing as candidates, informing elections, and expanding media options' (Weiss 2009: 741). Given Badawi's remarkable success in the 2004 election, BN's results in the 2008 election were hugely disappointing to its leaders. Although BN managed to remain in power, it failed to attain its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority (Liow 2012). Its share of seats in the Dewan Rakyat plummeted to 63%, whilst 'its overall popular vote dipped to 51%, and four more state governments toppled' (Weiss 2009: 741-2).

Three separate episodes of protest in Kuala Lumpur in late 2007 set the scene for this electoral upset. Together, they helped to reinvigorate civil society forces opposed to the ruling coalition and contribute towards the qualified success of the 2008 election. In September some 2,000 lawyers and activists, led by the Malaysian Bar Council, carried out a protest in Kuala Lumpur to call for an investigation into judicial corruption. Two months later, on 10 November, a Bersih Rally took place to protest corruption and demand electoral reform. Bersih extended the 'transethnic solidarities' created in 1998 that helped to build trust among Malaysians of different racial and religious backgrounds (G.C. Khoo 2013: 4). This was followed on 25 November by a 20,000 to 30,000-strong rally by the Hindu Rights Action Front (Hindraf), a coalition of thirty Hindu NGOs protesting against discrimination. Bypassing the mainstream media blackout, information about the protest was shared widely via email, texting, and social media such as Facebook. When footage of Indian mothers with children being sprayed with water cannon 'went viral' online and through offline media such as CDs, the MCA president conceded that the electoral fate of Barisan Nasional (BN) was now 'sealed' (Liow 2012: 303-304).⁷

7 Liow (2012: 302-303) explains how activists sought to bridge the digital divide through CDs and other means: 'As the reach of the internet in rural Malaysia was somewhat limited, alternative dissemination devices were employed to spread political parties' campaign messages to voters. The widespread distribution of mobile phones in rural areas enabled the effective use of Short Messaging Service (SMS) as a tool of information dissemination and mass mobilization. These text messages, transmitted via mobile phones, were used to devastating effect during the opposition campaign. Through these phone networks, targeted messages were sent to local communities informing of *ceramah* [M. political talk] and other campaign-related events in the vicinity, or simply to urge recipients to vote for change. Capabilities were also developed using the latest mobile phone technology to text and "blast" long lists of recipients at one go. Meanwhile, campaign activists copied internet-streamed video clips and footage onto video CDs, which were then circulated in rural areas. In some instances, video *ceramah* were played in coffee shops where people congregated, particularly in known opposition strongholds.'

If in the preceding section we discussed an instance of an early form of crowdsourced journalism in *The Free Media*, here we see instead a forerunner of a phenomenon I have termed 'viral reality', that is, the growing presence in the information landscape of digital contents 'shared' by citizens via digital networks. This is an environment in which news media professionals and amateurs, as well as ordinary citizens, compete and cooperate to share potentially 'viral' contents (Postill 2014).

Although alternative media were already used in 1998-1999, it was not until 2008 that they became 'vehicle[s] for mass political mobilisation', with YouTube, alternative news sites, and blogs among the more visible media (Liow 2012: 301). For instance, prior to the elections the communal blog *People's Parliament* carried out a campaign to boycott the mainstream press. This campaign was supported by Jeff Ooi and other leading bloggers (Ang 2008). Gong (2011) argues that blogs played a key part in the success of opposition candidates in the 2008 elections. This author found that bloggers were seven times more likely to win an election than non-bloggers, 'controlling for incumbency, party membership, and race' (ibid.: 307). Some candidates were in fact bloggers turned politicians, not least Ooi himself who went on to become an opposition MP in the northern state of Penang having funded his campaign through tens of thousands of dollars raised via his blog (Liow 2012: 303). This stands in stark contrast to the ruling coalition's media strategy, still largely reliant on its tight control of the mainstream media and limiting itself to ineffectual tactics such as using 'cybertroopers' to counter oppositional views (Weiss 2009: 754).⁸

The online newspaper *Malaysiakini*, for its part, continued to be a fulcrum of opposition-related news, having trained 'a growing clutch of critically minded young journalists' for more than a decade (Weiss 2009: 753). For Khoo (2010: 8) *Malaysiakini* was one of two key nodes laying 'the basis of a resurgence of the cyber-networks'. The other node was *Malaysia Today*, an online news site created in 2004 by Raja Petra Kamaruddin (RPK), a renowned blogger widely praised for his 'relentless outpouring of exposes of alleged corruption and wrongdoings in high places' (ibid.: 10). As the March 2008 election neared, a 'full array' of digital tools were mobilised by pro-democracy activists and other concerned citizens (ibid.: 15):

Between them, these networks and coalitions deployed text-messages, email lists, Internet postings, video-clips to overcome the controlled

8 This situation is similar to that of countries such as South Korea (Nosama.org) or the United States (Obama 2.0) where 'young' progressive candidates have made extensive use of new media, in some cases having to make virtue out of necessity owing to a lack of access to the mainstream media (see Papacharissi 2002).

media's reflexive shut-out of the Opposition. People who had not previously imagined themselves 'dissidents' sent appeals for funding, relayed notices of Opposition events, forwarded campaign materials, and transmitted calls for volunteer workers and polling observers. Old-school networks were reactivated and diasporic contacts established through cyber-space. The cyber-networks and the physical coalitions converged.

Following the 2008 election, a range of observers have highlighted the part played by new media in the opposition's best result since independence in 1957. For example, Salleh (2013: 1) stresses the strong influence of blogs throughout the decade, culminating in the 2008 elections. For this author, blogs have 'strongly empowered individuals to politically express themselves' (ibid.). Tang (2009: 135) notes that the internet was a 'major contributory factor' to the 'political tsunami' of 2008, whilst for Willnat et al. (in press) the use of online media was 'positively associated with [a] higher level of political participation among Malaysian voters'. Social media, according to Sani and Zengeni (2010) were 'definitely an important instrument in promoting democracy' in the run-up to the 2008 election. More specifically, conclude Smeltzer and Keddy (2010: 421), Facebook allowed citizens to 'express dissent, connect with like-minded individuals and organise'.

Other scholars are more sceptical of the influence of new media, and have urged colleagues to curb their enthusiasm. Thus Khoo (2010) argues that there is no simple causal link between internet use and opposition gains. For instance, in 2004 BN scored its largest victory ever, despite having had to face a more mature online activism scene and a higher level of internet penetration than in 1999. Moreover, in the 1999 general election, hi-tech urban voters did not support the *reformasi* candidates as much as low-tech rural Malays who turned against UMNO (the Malay component party of the ruling coalition). Similarly, Leong (2009) compares Malaysia with Singapore and suggests that we should not exaggerate the importance of the internet; many other factors need to be taken into account and placed in their historical and culture-specific contexts. This author highlights the more 'liberal' attitude of the Malaysian government towards the internet, but adding that the 2008 election and the protests that preceded it came at a unique historical moment, 'a moment where a growing media, cultural and digital sophistication coincided with the gathering of political dissent and agency amongst Malaysians' (2009: 475). For his part, Liow (2012) makes three interrelated points. First, he notes that the 'new media factor' is not exclusive to the opposition. Second, although citizens may have access to information that was not available in the pre-internet age, we cannot assume that they will act upon it and vote for the opposition

(ibid.: 300). Third, new media alone cannot overcome vexed problems that transcend technology such as Malaysia's deeply entrenched communalism or the customary in-fighting of its various opposition formations down the years (ibid.: 309). Still other scholars have questioned meteorological metaphors such as 'political tsunami' or 'perfect storm' commonly used to refer to the results of Malaysia's general election in 2008. Tongue-in-cheek, Khoo (2010: 1) points out that a real tsunami would have 'swept BN from power altogether', and that 'a perfect storm would not have completely bypassed Sabah and Sarawak'. For her part, Weiss (2009) adds quotation marks to the phrase 'historical victory' to indicate that BN did retain their majority after all.

These are valid criticisms, but while it is true that protest technology scholars should avoid overly enthusiastic celebrations of such episodes, the evidence presented so far strongly suggests that internet media did indeed contribute to the significant weakening of BN in 2008. As Khoo (2010) himself concedes, partly thanks to the skilful use of these technologies, Malaysians from all ethnic backgrounds began to imagine themselves as 'a community unified by dissent' (2010: 4), no mean feat in a country deeply divided among racial and religious lines with a tightly controlled mainstream media. This second wave of *reformasi* activity undoubtedly brought people together once again, paving the way for further socio-political gains in subsequent years.

4 The Bersih 2.0 Protests, 2011

On 9 July 2011, a rally calling for free and fair elections was held in Kuala Lumpur. Known as Bersih 2.0, this was the second in a series that started in 2007 (see Bersih protests, above) and resumed in 2012 as Bersih 3.0.⁹ Marchers made eight demands to the government, including a reform of the postal ballot, a clean electoral roll, a minimum of 21 days for campaign periods, the use of indelible ink when voting, and an end to 'money politics' (G.C. Khoo 2013: 9). Some 50,000 people attended the rally, which was poorly handled by the authorities who resorted to using excessive physical force to disperse the crowds (Welsh 2011).

9 The issue of where the 2.0 and 3.0 rhetoric originates, and the extent to which it is problematised by participants, will have to await a separate study (see Barassi and Trere 2012 in the context of Italian activism). In my experience, neither the desirability nor the inevitability of technological progress are often questioned in Malaysia.

This event served to reinvigorate the *reformasi* movement, returning the national conversation to the now desperate need for political reform. There were also novel elements to Bersih 2.0 with regard to previous mobilisations. For Welsh (2011) Bersih 2.0 was part of the ‘global rise of the “freedom generation”’, a generation learning to overcome their fear, one that attaches great value to civil liberties and human rights. This rally ushered in a ‘new form’ of grassroots politics consisting of four entwined elements: social media embedding, people power, broad civil society participation, and multi-ethnicity (Welsh 2011).

This was a historical moment in which viral reality, as defined earlier, was now fully installed in the cultural practices of millions of Malaysians. If in previous decades opinion leadership was literally anchored to TV stations and the press, the situation was now more complex, with traditional media and social media sharing this leadership – an altered media landscape teeming with ‘thousands of Facebook and Twitter opinion leaders’ (Radue 2012: 64, but see Chadwick 2013 for a nuanced discussion in a Western context). Whilst during the original Bersih rally of 2007 blogging and YouTube were arguably the two dominant social media, in 2011 two other mega-sites were hugely popular, namely Facebook and Twitter. As in Spain and other territories (see Postill & Pink 2012), Twitter was now the undisputed arena for all manner of actors across the political spectrum, from politicians, lawyers, celebrities, or the police to activists and ordinary citizens. Thus Yeoh (2011) found that from 9 June to 14 Aug 2011, Twitter had nearly 34,000 users engaged with the Bersih 2.0 campaign, with over 263,000 tweets using the hashtag (Twitter keyword) #bersih. This researcher also found the use of Facebook and Twitter PicBadges (circular images placed in the corner of users’ profile photos) to create ‘common spaces for common faces’; the practice of advocacy via Twitter to reach politicians and foreign media; the use of wit, sarcasm, and other forms of humour channelled through a range of hashtags; documentary evidence shared on YouTube and other social media contradicting official versions of events, especially surrounding police violence; or Bersih 2.0 micro-storytelling gathered around the hashtag #bersihstories, such as:

1. I saw the faces of family, friends, and every single type of Malaysian there is, all united as one for a just cause.
2. I nvr once felt unsafe in the Bersih crowd. Ppl said hello, took pix. V civilised n disciplined.
3. I saw hope. In different skin colors today but with one purpose.
4. ran out of salt water, helped two people charge phones by my laptop. Got tear-gassed several times but the gasmask saved me.

5. As we marched outside KL Sentral, passing cars and trains honked to show support, bypassers clapped and cheered at us!¹⁰

Taking advantage of the interactive, public nature of Twitter, the police responded to accusations of brutality by releasing selective videos through the relevant hashtags and by encouraging citizens to report on protesters, so as to be able to charge individuals who made ‘false reports against the force’ (Jaraparilla 2011). As this example shows, social media have not only enabled reform-minded Malaysians to find one another through devices such as Twitter hashtags, Facebook ‘likes’, or Google searches, they have also made the country’s profound divides more visible by creating new sites of conflict and contestation. From a field-theoretical perspective (at least in the more dynamic version of this theory that I advocate, see Postill 2011), this is only to be expected, for political fields consist not only of activists and protesters but also of ‘mediating agencies’ such as the police and the press (Crossley 2002), and indeed of more shadowy figures operating behind the scenes (Postill 2013b).

As in other 2010 and 2011 protests – for example, in Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, or the United States (Juris 2012, Postill in press) – the excessive use of force by the Malaysian state had the unintended consequence of garnering broad sympathy and support for the protesters, both home and abroad. G.C. Khoo (2013) argues that the Bersih series (2007, 2011, 2012) helped to deepen cross-ethnic and inter-generational solidarities among protesters ‘confronted by water cannon, tear gas and police brutality’. As a result of this shared experience, new discourses of identity and belonging emerged through #bersihstories and other popular channels, beyond earlier discourses built around ethnicity or religion. Rejecting racial narratives, the opposition speeches in the subsequent electoral campaign stressed national unity and identity, with phrases such as ‘*Kita Anak Malaysia*’ (We are Children of Malaysia) (G.C Khoo 2013: 4).¹¹

For many Bersih 2.0 participants, this was a liminal phase of rebirth as Malaysians, after enduring the lifelong sentiment of not fully belonging to their own nation. In other words, these were digitally mediated rites of democratisation and nation-building (see Postill 2006). Many protesters expressed the idea that ‘it was the first time I felt Malaysian’ (Yeoh 2011). A 39-year old Indian Malaysian doctor related his transition ‘from ethnic

10 See the Facebook page Bersih Stories, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/rakyat-melaka/tweets-selected-bersih-20-stories-from-twitter/227583263943331>.

11 To what extent Bersih contents and intentions changed over this five-year period (2007 to 2012) is another open question. A preliminary assessment would suggest that they remained consistent.

Other and second class citizen to legitimate citizen' in religious terms: 'We joined them and there I was – a born-again Malaysian. For the first time, I was proud to be Malaysian'. Another protester, CL Shue, aged 58, recalls his detention with thousands of others (Shue 2011: 106, quoted in Khoo, G.C. 2013a, my emphasis):

Teachers, students, older people, women, traders, security guards, workers, politicians, religious teachers, wise men ... There were many more, and I have no idea what they did for a living ... The thing that was of importance was we were all there for one reason. *We were one people*. There were no barriers. It was a wonderful experience. It set me free. Free from fear. Free to feel the brotherhood, and the nationhood of brothers. Merdeka!

Another new feature of these demonstrations was their geographical reach well beyond the borders of Malaysia. If on previous occasions emigrated Malaysians had been able to follow events at home through blogs or independent news sites like Malaysiakini, this time they could actively participate by organising 'their own Bersih events in more than 30 cities around the world' (Yeoh 2011). This participation, in turn, had reverberations right across their personal networks in Malaysia, adding another layer of engagement and connectedness to the events. In effect, what we are witnessing here is the emergence of a new form of 'media event' (Dayan & Katz 1992), namely a shared slice of national history mediated not through radio or television, but largely through social network sites – *a social media event*.

In Malaysia's 14th general election of 2013, the opposition 'won the popular vote' following a campaign promoting a non-racial, citizen-driven, and transparent system of government. BN obtained the worst result in its history, winning by a simple majority (133 to 89 parliamentary seats) (Khoo, G.C. 2013: 3-4).¹² That Bersih 'helped trigger people's engagement in politics'

12 According to Chin (2013: 538), the opposition lost the 13th general elections owing to both a biased electoral system and a vote miscalculation in East Malaysia: 'First, structural impediments meant that the opposition victory was always difficult at best and impossible at worst. The Malaysia electoral system, the first-pass-the-post system, is biased towards the ruling BN. There is extensive gerrymandering and malapportionment..., problems with the electoral roll, and the partial behaviour of the Electoral Commission. Essentially, to win a general election in Malaysia, you need to win East Malaysia (57 seats or 25% of the 222 seats in parliament) and the rural or semi-urban seats (158 or 71% of the seats). The opposition did exceedingly well in the urban areas but urban areas have the least number of seats.'

(Khoo, Y.H. 2013) is indisputable; to what extent, and exactly in what ways new media technologies aided the movement, is the challenging question that shall have to await a separate study. The evidence gathered here, however, suggests that these technologies did indeed play an important part.

5 Discussion

The preceding historical account invites a number of reflections on internet activism – broadly defined – and social protest in Malaysia, and indeed elsewhere. In this section I present these reflections with reference to the recent scholarship on digital media and new protest movements in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011. In the interest of space, I will limit myself to three themes: temporality, comparison, and generalisation.

On the issue of temporality, the first striking feature of Malaysia's technological trajectory is that 'it all kicked off' (Mason 2012) not in 2011 but rather in 1998. In any national polity, current affairs are often *recurrent* affairs that go to the heart of the polis and its changing relation to the people. Malaysia is no exception. Whilst in America one perpetual tension is that between competing liberal vs. conservative visions of the national future (Goldfarb 2011), and in Spain the unresolved legacy of the civil war still informs the national conversation, in Malaysia, as we have just seen, the question of full citizenship for all nationals has shaped the country's public discourse since independence (Postill 2006). It follows that in order to understand the events that took place in 2011, we must relate them not only to the Arab protests that predated them, or to the ubiquitous trope of reform, but also to the unfinished business of national belonging for the country's ethnic minorities.

But there is another important aspect to temporality introduced earlier in the discussion, namely its multilinearity. Convoluted historical processes such as the struggle for political reform and equal rights will exhibit not a single timeline – as perhaps suggested by my standard chronology of the main protest events – but rather a multiplicity of timelines. Elsewhere I have suggested, following Sewell (2005), that in addition to events, it is worth tracing the parallel timelines of other forms of temporality such as trends and routines so as to construct more robust models of protest movements as they unfold over time (Postill 2013b). Transposing this idea to the Malaysian case, what emerges is more interesting than the mere ebbing and flowing of protest. For example, one observable trend is the growing sophistication of the media practices and actions performed by Malaysian activists from 1998 to the present, even if this

does not necessarily translate into success at the ballot box. From a routine timeline viewpoint, we observe the routinisation of digital sophistication at key hubs such as Malaysiakini, YouTube, Twitter, or the blogosphere. Another, related trend, is the viralisation of Malaysia's media ecology with the unchecked rise of digital content 'sharing' as an everyday activity. During periods of peak protest activity, this culture of digital sharing takes on a more urgent character, but it still draws from the ongoing normalisation of retweeting, 'liking', email resending, and other potentially viral forms of interpersonal communication. Technologically, one significant difference between 1998 and 2011 is that the power to share political information has been greatly democratised, which again is emphatically not the same as the power to change a political regime.

Second, a brief comparison of Malaysia's history of social protest with that of neighbouring countries as well as countries further afield reveals intriguing contrasts as well as commonalities. Thus Weiss (2007) has compared the reformist trajectories of Indonesia and Malaysia. Although both countries were severely affected by the financial crisis of 1997, reformism in Malaysia's 'competitive electoral authoritarian' system took a 'largely electoral route', whereas Indonesia's 'hegemonic electoral authoritarian' regime collapsed under pressure from social protest, 'encouraged by elite factionalism'. Singapore presents an altogether different picture, with its dormant civil society in sharp contrast with Malaysia's exuberant civil society, the latter being both tech savvy and firmly established in brick-and-mortar organisations. As George (2005) has argued,

Singapore has no contentious website remotely as successful as Harakah Daily because it does not have an opposition party like PAS – formidably organized, well endowed and strongly ideological.

Comparisons with countries outside Southeast Asia are also revealing. Take the case of Spain, a country that experienced a strong wave of popular protest against its political and financial class in 2011. Among the similarities with Malaysia's Bersih 2.0 protests of 2011, we can mention the common inspiration of Tahrir Square; Spain's *indignados*' commitment to nonviolence, even in the face of police brutality (Postill in press); the strategic use of humour for both internal (citizen solidarity) and external (political critique) purposes (Romanos 2013); the emphasis on inter-generational solidarity (symbolised in Spain by elderly *yayoflauta* protesters wearing yellow reflective vests, and in Malaysia by the iconic figure of the courageous Auntie Bersih, described by a journalist as 'a lone, elderly and frail woman clad in a yellow T-shirt, drenched to the

bone in chemical-laced water amid the backdrop of a vanguard of riot police flanked by water cannon trucks'; Chie & Aw 2011); the extensive use of social media and smartphones to share protest-related information; and the remote participation of diasporic citizens not through broadcast media events but through 'social media events'. Some of the more striking contrasts between Spain and Malaysia include the conspicuous absence of nation-building rhetoric in the former (the very thought of a Spanish nation is abhorrent to many citizens) and the indignados' rejection of Spain's political class as a whole (Malaysian's struggle for an alternating two-coalition system being the logical opposite of the ongoing struggle against Spain's two-party system).

Finally, there remains the problem of how to theorise these findings in a global context. What can the Malaysian case tell us about the elusive relationship between internet activism and social protest worldwide? In a previous paper I have proposed a new theory of social protest post-Tahrir based on my Spanish research (Postill 2013a). Here my aim is to refine this theory by taking into consideration Malaysia's distinctive trajectory. Very briefly, I wish to propose the following outline of a global theory. The wave of social protest that broke out in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread to other Arab countries and beyond throughout 2011, was largely the result of three unevenly convergent trends: the global financial crisis of 2008, the 2010 mainstreaming of 'nerd activism' epitomised by formations such as Wikileaks and Anonymous, and the spectacular instantiation of people power by Tunisian and Egyptian protesters in late 2010 and early 2011.

To sum up this potent formula I will introduce the acronym 3MPR. The numeral '3' stands for three leading types of liberation technology (or nerd) activist that are spearheading the global movement towards greater informational and democratic freedom, namely hackers, lawyers, and journalists. In virtually all national struggles, I suggest, we find today these three specialists leading the charge against corrupt governments and financiers. The letter 'M' represents a motley (or mixture) of tech and non-tech specialists collaborating with the vanguard and acting as cultural brokers between them and the general population. This fluid sector of the movement-field will vary greatly in its size and composition from one country to the next, but we can nonetheless expect to find among them a long tail of students, teachers, intellectuals, celebrities, designers, artists, and even anthropologists. The letter 'P' stands for the general population or people of a nation-state going through a phase of social unrest and protest. Finally, the 'R' can refer to reform, revolution, or regime change depending again on the spatio-temporal coordinates of the protest at hand. For example, whilst in Egypt the 3MPR level was fully reached with the removal of Mubarak, in Malaysia we can only speak of a 3MP configuration in

2011, and even this is questionable given how divided ‘the people’ are along pro- and anti-reformist camps.¹³

The Malaysian evidence suggests the following caveat. Where in Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, or the US ‘hacktivist’ outlets such as Wikileaks and Anonymous were widely regarded by protesters as allies in their struggle for freedom and social justice, in Malaysia the latter formation was received with far more ambivalence. Thus when a large number of Malaysian government websites were attacked by Anonymous prior to the Bersih 2.0 rally, some of the rally organisers sought to defuse criticism from the authorities by distancing themselves from the attacks. Moreover, while the leading role played by Malaysian lawyers and journalists is unquestionable, that of computer hackers and geeks remains obscure.

6 Conclusion

Just as there is no single timeline that can accommodate the full range of events, routines, and trends that have shaped the struggle for freedom and justice in Malaysia, so there is no simple account of technological progress from the email messages and listservs of the 1990s through blogging and web forums in the early 2000s to today’s social media and smartphones. As we have seen, Malaysia’s activists operate within a highly differentiated media ecology in which old and new media, actors, and issues interact in complex ways. In other words, a replacement model of media – the idea that newer media replace older media – would not be of much use in trying to explain such an environment.

That said, no two media technologies are the same, and like activists around the world, Malaysia’s freedom fighters must adjust their individual activities and collective actions to the specific technical and political affordances of each platform (or set of platforms). For example, we saw how Malaysia’s police took advantage of Twitter’s central location as the country’s preeminent public arena to counter accusations of brutality and to call for the public’s assistance in tracking down allegedly violent Bersih 2.0 protesters. Meanwhile, Facebook and YouTube provided Malaysians living abroad with new digital avenues through which to participate and ‘share’ in the protests remotely.

13 A note of caution is in order here. As rightly pointed out by an anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this article, although this formula helps the analyst identify certain missing parties such as hacktivists, ‘it might be harder to identify other players towards which the formula doesn’t gear our attention’.

A hard to quantify factor, yet one that is in evidence throughout this 15-year history, is the sheer ingenuity and resourcefulness of protesters' media engagements, as well as their courage when confronting the riot police, to the great admiration of liberal-minded Singaporeans following their progress through social media – sympathetic outsiders whose own civil society is far less vibrant than Malaysia's. Through a long process of trial and error, Malaysia's online activists have found creative ways of bypassing the authorities and of reaching out to constituencies lying beyond the digital divide.

Future studies should regard the techno-political past not as a foreign country, but as a research area full of comparative potential. More research is needed on many aspects of the history summarily covered here. Thus there is much to be investigated about the class and gender dimensions of this realm of political action, and about reformist campaigns and trends in Malaysian locales other than Kuala Lumpur (where most of the research has concentrated to date), especially in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak which, as usual, have been largely sidelined. We also know very little about the internet practices and actions of Malaysia's labour movement, a literature that remains divorced from the mainstream activism research considered here. Finally, much more research is needed into the part played by computer geeks and hackers in recent Malaysian protests at a time when we witness a world-wide profusion of collaborative endeavours linking these experts to less technically gifted actors.

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